



# The Influence of Theology and Religious Values on Social Policy from Reconstruction to Obama

Ezekiel Ette, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Social Work, Delaware State University, Dover DE, United States.

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**\*Corresponding Author:** Ezekiel Ette, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Social Work, Delaware State University, Dover DE, United States.

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## Abstract

The history of religious movements and the tensions and effects of such movements on welfare policy is explored in this article. Though the First Amendment to the US Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”, the secular and ecclesiastical orders have engaged in activities at the margins of this provision of the first amendment such that differentiating one line from the other, sometimes, has become blurred. Christianity has become the dominant religion in the United States, yet issues of gender and group belonging have contributed to this blurring of lines. The effects of all these have sometimes appeared as the usurpation of freedom rather than its enhancement. Those within the dominant religion itself, have found themselves debating and fortifying their positions. In a free society, the church and state debate have affected and raised further questions about justice. Social workers, whose principal mission is the seeking of path towards liberation and justice, should not deny the influence of religion on social welfare policy, but should seek to understand the historical pathways as good advocates for justice in a broken world.

**Keywords:** Values, Social Gospel Movement, Islam, Advocacy, Justice, Ideology, Social Welfare Policy

## Introduction

The place of religion in American politics has historically been controversial. The disagreement is not based on facts and reason but on suspicion. Scientists and philosophers, according to Gianella, [1] have decided to sit on the sidelines watching the debate about the place of religion in politics. No one can deny the influence of one on the other. The question is not whether such influence exists, but rather, if there should be a place for religion in the American political arena. The first amendment to the U.S. constitution specifically forbids the establishment of religion and the making of laws that arrest the exercise of the freedom to worship, which some have interpreted as the intermingling of church and state, but there is no denying the fact that throughout history public policies have been influenced by the teachings of the church. As Day, [2] reminded

us, no American public policy or law has gone against the Judeo-Christian teaching, instead public policy makers have been influenced by the values of Judaism and Christianity. In our time the responsibility of policing the boundary of church and state has even been extended to the schools and forcing schools to police religious behavior such as praying, though the schools are not actively trying to influence what individual students believe.

The effort to regulate religious behavior and the curtail of individual rights based on what the state deems inappropriate belief is well documented and stands as a testimony to this struggle of the power of the state over religion. In Davis V. Beason (1890), for example, the US Supreme Court upheld the State of Idaho law requiring Latter Day Saints (LDS) members to take an oath before they could vote. Though the law was designed to prevent polygamists from voting, it was entirely discriminatory and aimed specifically at LDS members, yet the court found that the state had a right to decide what was religious behavior and what was not [3].

In an androcentric culture, white men historically dominated both religion and politics. Just as religious thought was controlled by men, politics was once the purview of men. Men were the ones who talked about politics, and it is not a surprise that the political process was colored by the dictates of religion. Gradually, political decisions and actions became activities based on group attachment. Those who owned property in the colonial and post-colonial period in America reserved the exclusive right of voting and making political decisions for themselves. Thus, women and people of color were not allowed to vote. Women were expected to leave as conversations turned to politics. Thoughtful decisions were absent in political decisions, instead decisions were made based on group membership and attachment.

The place of religion in the political arena has always been debatable. As O’Brein (1968) reminds us, the juxtaposition of the terms “Church and State” rather than religious and secular life is legalistic. It quickly calls for a debate because such distinction between what is the church and what is the state is drawn from ecclesiastical terminology. The beginning of this debate can be located as far as back as 1297 A.D.

when Pope Boniface VIII issued an encyclical called *Clerics Laicos*. The question then was: should the clergy pay taxes to the state? Pope Boniface VIII did not think so, and so the Bishops then, with their enormous wealth, refused to pay taxes to the Crown. Edward I of England ordered the forfeiture of properties that belonged to the prelates until the taxes owed were paid. Since then, it seems like the state has had an upper hand in regulating religious behavior. Yet, what is done in the polity has also been influenced by religion. There is an inherent tension between religion and what is done in secular society.

In this section I will summarize and borrow from O'Brien's thoughts on the issue: In this debate on the place of religion and politics O'Brien opined that we usually overlook a few facts on the seeming tensions between the secular society and religion such as: time, place, and manner of the exercise of religious freedom, which is regulated by the state in a way that serves the secular purpose. As a young pastor of a church in Portland, Oregon in the 1990s, I was surprised to learn that holding an open-air service in a public park requires permission from the county Park and Recreation Department. Yet, one of my rights as an American provided by the First Amendment to the US Constitution is the right to worship however I please. Such freedom was however curtailed by the secular state that required the buying of a permit. Additionally, how such service was conducted was influenced by the rules against the violation of the county noise ordinance and anti-panhandling law. I had to include in my permit application if there would be a live band and if offering will be part of the service in order not to violate the county anti-pan-handling law. The permit was issued only after the county was satisfied that the free exercise of religious behavior, though guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution, would not violate the county ordinances.

There are tensions between dominant and minority religion too. While Christianity is part of the common law, for example, Islam is not. The state of Oklahoma specifically has statutory prohibition against using Sharia Law for legislative purposes in the state. It would be unthinkable to have Muslim men in the United States annulling their marriages through the Muslim Triple *Talaq* – a tradition that allows a man to say “I divorce you” three times in the presence of a witness. The Court in the state of Michigan, though it allowed the Muslim call to prayer known as *Azaan* in 1979 in Dearborn, ordered the mosque not to increase the volume of its loudspeaker more than that of a church bell.

Another tension is between authority and conscience and the U.S Supreme Court had decided in 1931 in the case of *United States v. Macintosh*, 283 U.S. 605 that those who would refuse to take up arms to fight for the United States because of their religious conviction, are not eligible for US citizenship. Douglass Macintosh, a Canadian and Professor of Theology at Yale University who was seeking citizenship in the United States said his first allegiance was to God and not the nation and so he refused to swear an oath to take up arms in war, if called upon, unless he himself determined through his religious conscience that it was a just war. For this, the court upheld a lower court's decision that he was ineligible for United States' citizenship. This decision by the apex court was an echo of an earlier decision in *United States v. Schwimmer*, 279 U.S. 644 (1929). Here, Rosika Schwimmer, the Hungarian pacifist, had also refused to swear an oath to take up arms and the court ruled against her citizenship.

There is also an inherent tension between the individual and society. Whatever religious behavior we choose, secular society is not interested in protecting us if the law prohibits such behavior. For example, the so-called Sherbet Test handed down by the U.S Supreme Court in *Sherbert v. Verner* | 374 U.S. 398 (1963) affirms that individuals who choose not to work on a certain day of the week,

because of religious reasons, may have a right to accommodation in the workplace but such right does not constitute a right to unemployment benefits by the state.

There seems to be disagreement about the role that individuals who subscribe to a certain ideological bent should play in the social welfare arena. Progressive historians often portray conservatives as heartless while the later see the progressives as encouraging idleness and irresponsibility.

In this article, we seek to investigate the history of religious movements and their effects on social welfare policy beginning in the 19th century revivalist movement to the 21st century under President Obama. The relevant questions are: What is the role of religion on America's social welfare policy? What arguments existed and what biblical interpretations were used in arguing for maintaining the status quo or changes?

## The Social Gospel Movement

Though many writers locate the beginning of the social Gospel Movement at the publication of Walter Rauschenbusch's book *A Theology of the Social Gospel*. (1917), it is important to point out that the movement was already at its height at the time. Many present churchgoers may not know about Washington Gladden, but chances are that they have sung his hymn and may not have realized his fiery points in the lines of the hymn “*O Master Let Me Walk with Thee*” which first appeared in the Spring of [4]. One of America's foremost Social Gospel Movement advocates, The Rev Gladden was first a newspaper reporter before he became a pastor. It has always been historically understood that the function of the Christian church is for the spiritual nurture of its members. Thus, the church functions, within this model, as a center for renewal and the citadel from which members, who are followers of Christ serve their communities. The members hear the good news and proclaim to those outside of the church what they have heard in words and indeed. Evangelism springs out from this center (the church) and radiates to the world outside. The operating word in the process is love, not only to those around the individual member, but to those who may be far away. The old law of love just for the countryman in Leviticus 19 was said to be replaced by love for all as proclaimed in Matthew 5 : 43ff, and those in need as demonstrated in the story of the Good Samaritan that is always so eloquently told on Sundays. This traditional model of love for the neighbor assumes that those who follow the Christ have been convicted of their sins, have believed, and in the traditional Wesleyan teaching are striving to live the life and the teachings that were delivered to the saints: they may not be perfect, but they are constantly striving towards perfection. Given this understanding and this theology, the question that adherents of the social gospel movement asked then was: “Should the structures of this world be converted by Christians into those of social justice? Should Christian ethics be applied as solutions to social problems? Professor Mallard of Emory University (1997) framed it this way: “should the things of this world become furnishings for the Kingdom of Heaven?” What then should be the role of the Christian on social issues? Should the Christian take sides? Should the Christian work actively for change in social conditions or ignore social injustice and wait for a world to come where there will be no more sorrow and when old things will pass away? Does saving the soul involve taking care of the body here and now? These were the theological debates and disagreements that divided the Christian community in the 19th century. The debate became more than a theological argument as the possibility of the Civil War became real following the disagreement over slavery. In fact, some were so convinced of the superiority of their conviction and rightness that a compromise was not possible as the nation marched closer to war.

It is wrong to assume that the Social Gospel Movement was the first time that the debate surfaced that Biblical religion has a regenerative

mission in the mundane world [5]. The question about social relationships in the post ascension period occupied the early Christians as early as the Pauline Missions just as the prophets in the Old Testaments period had called for justice and compassion for the poor as expressions of believe and obedience to the divine law. For our present purpose, we begin with the social Gospel Movement as a departing point for a number of reasons. First it is the closest to our time and played a major role in the debate in race relations. Second, it contributed to the superiority and stand of the opposing groups in how they saw their moral position and finally, the same arguments would play a great role in the policies of the Great Society of President Lyndon Johnson in the 1970s. Dorrie [5] further argues that the Social Gospel Movement was a North American version of the debate in social structure and social justice which occurred in Europe at the same time. It is important to note that some like Jane Addams who strongly believed in the regenerative power of the Gospel found other ways to put their faith to practice and left the theological debate aside. Trained in the theological school in Chicago at a time when men claimed superiority based on Biblical religion and shut women out of the church ministry, Jane Addams left upon graduation and founded the profession of Social Work. In Germany, the existential movement stressed the here and now and moved away from generalities and such discourses as the soul. The German critical religious movement applied the historical critical method for interpreting the scripture and church dogma made popular by the German theologians such as Adolf Harnack. The stress of this religious movement tended to be on the experiential and social relevance of the Gospel rather than the creedal and dogmatic aspects [6]. In the United States, therefore, the social Gospel movement applied the same thinking to contemporary issues such as slavery, racism, poverty of immigrants and the plight of factory workers. Many disagreed with the social Gospel advocates and many like The Rev Gladden lost their positions in the Church as a result of their stand and conviction.

Social conditions in the late 19th century gave impetus to the movement. Among these was the need for land by the railroad barons who needed land for the railways [2]. Landowners saw their land taken especially in the west and the wealth of the railroad barons against the poverty of the landowners brought support of progressive Christians. The rise of the labor movements and advocacy to end child labor also gained the sympathy of the social gospel advocates. There was also the rise in immigration. Day [2] argued that immigration during the period of the civil war grew rapidly bringing diverse religious beliefs to the nation. Some of these beliefs advocated socialism and political freedom. To this must also be added the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in 1867, the black codes and the complicity of the Churches in the south in oppressing African Americans. Groups, such as the Baseball Club of the First Baptist Church in Memphis were chapters of the Ku Klux Klan that advocated for torture, rape and killings of Catholics, Jews and African Americans [7]. Some Christian churches were implicated in the hate crimes and racial injustice of the time, and this led to those who disagreed to take a stand. The movement advocates called for government reforms in social welfare policies and presented their arguments as the basics of Christianity [2].

On the other hand, those who opposed the Social Gospel movement and its theology adopted Social Darwinism as the Biblical thing to believe in. As Day again reported, some conservative preachers advocated that allowing the unfit to die was God's law and they found an ally in the Charity Organization Societies. Coll [8] quoted Josephine Lowell, founder of the New York Charity Organization Society as saying that helping the poor and the disabled simply

Seeks material ends by material means, and therefore must fail...  
For man is a spiritual being, and, if he is to be helped, it must be by spiritual means (p. 44 – 45).

For others, at this time however, the Biblical injunction “to preach

the Gospel to the poor” and the saving of souls did not exclude the consideration of social concerns of this world. Maud Booth, for example, one of the founders of The Salvation Army declared in 1896 that preaching to homeless women makes a mockery of the gospel if she could not provide them any help [9]. It is important to note that this period falls into what is normally referred to as the Progressive Era in American history. Many rejected what Tittle [10] called “the impotence of a gospel of individual salvation”, but instead got involved in Christian social activism, political reform, and advocacy on behalf of the poor and immigrants.

### Values as Guidepost

In the social welfare arena, values are what shape ideologies and the latter in turn drive policies. A value is not the description of how the world is, but what it should be. It is not, therefore, surprising that others disagreed. With the growing calls for translating the Christian faith into furnishings of the here and now, there arose other voices that argued for the status quo. On Thanksgiving night 1915, seventeen men lit a wooden cross on fire atop Stone Mountain, Georgia and the new Ku Klux Klan was born and according to them, they committed themselves to “the tenets of Christianity” [11]. Barkun [12] reminded us that no matter how odd or repellant views may be, when such views support a framework for deeply held positions and provide a rail towards an end, those who hold them generally believe them to be true. Perhaps this may explain why H. W. Evans, the Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan wrote in the Kourier Magazine and believe that:

As the star of Bethlehem guided the wisemen to Christ, so it is that the Klan is expected more and more to guide men to the right life under Christ's banner (p.2)

Baker pointed out the symbolism of the founding of the Klan on Thanksgiving Day and proceeded to paint the picture of a group that saw itself as Christians, getting “behind Old Glory and the Church of Jesus Christ” (p.1). The group saw Christian fundamentalism as the path to making right what it perceived as social wrong and became critical of liberal theological interpretation that was inclusive. The Scope Trial and the repeal of prohibition provided the impetus and the illusion that the KKK was fighting for America. John Scopes, a substitute Biology teacher stood trial for teaching Darwin's Evolution Theory in a Biology class contrary to state law in Tennessee (History. com, ND). As a result, the KKK influenced the political process in the south, the west and Midwest through the churches [11] Most social welfare policies following the Reconstruction adopted Social Darwinism and led to practices that reflected the views of the time including the famous Supreme Court decision in Plessy Vs. Fergusson where the court codified the separate but equal doctrine. Such decision and views led to the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan which denied African American and Jews their rights in the south and Mid West. By 1915 twelve states had sterilization laws on the books forcing non-Anglo-Saxon individuals to undergo sterilization lest they infect society with inferior genes [2]. By 1932 the number of states with sterilization law had reached thirty-six. The 1924 Immigration Act looked upon immigrants from other areas outside of Western Europe as undesirables and imposed quotas based on National origin to keep out Eastern and Southern Europeans. By 1913 Congress made it illegal to sell land to Japanese aliens to prevent them from competing with white farmers. This was followed by a ban on mail order brides in 1920 to prevent the immigration of Japanese women and in 1922 the Supreme court in Ozawa Vs, U.S declared the Japanese not eligible for citizenship.

The influence of the social Gospel movement and the message of the movement perhaps contributed to some social policies of the period. It should be pointed out here that though social Darwinism was a value of the period, the progressive voices of the social gospel movement affected the legislation of the period and resulted in favorable legislations that benefitted the workers. For example, the



formation of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in 1908 included several individuals who also were active in the Social Gospel Movement. The alleviation of the suffering of the poor and the exploited, which was the cardinal belief of the progressive movement, inspired so many to work for justice [13]. The formation of the Board of Public Welfare in various cities and states between 1910 -1917 was a testimony to the influence of the voices of those who were in the progressive camp of the social gospel movement. The 1909 White House Conference on Children meant that voices that were calling on the regulation of child labor were beginning to be heard. By 1912, A Children Bureau was established by President Taft. Very relevant and significant to this section is the role of the Catholic Church in the 1924 proposed amendment to the constitution that would have banned child labor in the United States. The Catholic Church formed an alliance with manufacturers and campaigned that such amendment would be a threat to family life and the amendment was defeated in congress [2]. Several social welfare programs were enacted during the progressive era including mothers' pension, veterans benefits and of course, social security.

### The Civil Rights Movement

There is no doubt that the civil right movement was born in the church in the 1950s and led by a little-known preacher at the time known as the Rev. (Dr.) Martin Luther King Jr. Following a bus boycott occasioned by the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks and tensions in the community from news of the murder of a fourteen-year-old boy, Emmitt Till, by white supremacists in Money, Mississippi, Dr King was elected to lead a resistant movement in Alabama [14]. There is also little doubt that the African American community has historically seen the church as an instrument of change. As Franklin Frazier [15] reminded us, it is hard to understand a people, their history, or politics without understanding their religion. Shut out from other arena, the church for the African American was the only social institution that truly allowed them to be human; therefore, the distinction and the debate on the ecclesiastical and the secular for the African American was irrelevant and non-essential. Washington [14] reminded us that the African American church was often not the initiator of change, but simply responded to crises elsewhere in the community. The Church was uniquely positioned to act in that capacity because it had leaders who were more educated than the rest of the community and was a unifying voice of the community.

The religious message of the movement is crystallized in Dr King's *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, [16]. Dr King saw the church not as a thermometer that measured public opinion and joined in blind conformity, but as an instrument of regeneration pushed by a sense of justice and the divine decree of redeeming love. He opposed "pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities" (pg.96) preached from the pulpits that were not capable of changing relationships between humans. To Dr. King, the Christian faith should result in good works, for human love and relationships no matter the race of the other.

The civil rights era brought social welfare programs that were direct result of the call for change by the church leaders and those they sensitized to the need for justice. The Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Acts are direct results of the call for justice in my opinion. Others were the establishment of AFDC in 1967 and the older American Act, 1965. In fact, the call by the civil rights movement for the "Beloved Society" resulted in changes and programs of the Great Society by President Johnson. It is important to note that the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act fundamentally changed the United States Immigration policy from a focus on Western Europeans to making America a land where all could come, was enacted in this period.

### The Reagan and Conservative Era

Boyd, [17] has described the evangelicals in this era as fusing together "the kingdom of God with a preferred vision of the kingdom

of the world" ( pg. 11). Following the successes of the civil rights era, the economic and political crisis of the Jimmy Carter years led to the election of the conservative Ronald Reagan to the White House. It also led to a marriage of convenience between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party. The rise of the Rev. Jerry Fallwell, a conservative Baptist pastor from Virginia, and a group he founded known as the Moral Majority sought and indeed influenced social welfare policies in the Reagan years. Boyd [17] provided the background for this marriage and delineated the reasons for the close connection between politics and religion in America: The first is the enduring myth that America is a Christian nation, and the church is its guardian, and the second is the myth that the founding of the country was God's will. Both perspectives, he argued, are demonstrated in the flag and the cross, standing side by side in church sanctuaries across the nation on Sunday mornings.

More than the substance of what the Moral Majority brought to the discussion about the role of Government in social welfare was the style with which the argument was framed. Cnaan [18] argued that the style of the religious community at this time was the focus on public discourse on the good works of the religious community, and the demonization of government welfare programs. President Reagan himself demonstrated this when he turned the parable of the Good Samaritans against those who have traditionally advocated for increased government involvement in social welfare. In his address to a group of church leaders in November 1982, the President put a new spin thus on the familiar story:

The story of the Good Samaritan has always illustrated to me what God's challenge really is. He crossed the road, knelt down, bound up the wounds of the beaten traveler, the pilgrim, and carried him to the nearest town. He didn't go running into town and look for a caseworker to tell him that there was a fellow out there that needed help. He took it upon himself. (quoted in Cnaan pg. 7)

Cnaan opined that the vilification of public servants who served the needs of the poor made it easy and acceptable to the American public for the Reagan Administration to cut public welfare benefits for the poor. The needs of the poor were cast as being best cared for at the local level and by non-governmental agencies even though there were no resources available at the local level.

In line with the values of a Political Action Committee known as the Christian Coalition and led by The Rev. Jerry Fallwell and the Rev. Pat Robertson, the Reagan Administration and later the Bush Administration set to dismantle programs that helped the poor and the needy. Certain programs such as Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC), Social Security Supplemental Income (SSI) and food stamps were transferred to the States and others were privatized [2]. Prominent among the policies that changed how the government supported the poor was the enactment of the Family Support Act of 1988. The law reflected the values of the religious right demanding moving poor mothers from welfare to work and cutting eligibility benefits for those receiving AFDC. Many social welfare programs were affected, privatized, changed or abolished by the Reagan and George Herbert Bush Administrations including civil rights and education.

President Clinton ended the cozy relationship between evangelical Christians and the White House. He tried to implement health care reforms but was unable and had to drop the plan. Following the election of George W. Bush, he created the Faith Based Initiative and located that office directly in the White House. The idea that the Churches should compete for Federal grants to serve the poor was at the heart of the Faith Based initiative. What was controversial in the policy was the seeming lack of separation between what is secular and what is religious. In a speech in New Orleans in January 2004, the President said that the program seeks to "fund programs that save

Americans one soul at a time” This new religious language from the president of the United States was troubling for a number of people. The program sought to codify what was simply an idea and practice in the Reagan years and make it a permanent part of the American social welfare system. In the process, it raised serious questions about the constitutional provision of the separation between church and state. By 2005 about \$2.1 billion dollars was given to churches and religious organizations through this program according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

### Social Welfare in the Obama Years

President Barack Obama assumed the presidency and did not abolish the Faith Based Initiative office contrary to expectations before the election. Instead in 2009, he amended Executive Order 13199 that established the initiative to include neighborhood partnerships. In 2010 he simply issued an executive order to clarify and ensure the separation between church and state in the administration of the program. The order required faith-based providers to identify alternative providers and inform those who may object to their services about these alternative providers. It further required a list of those religious providers receiving funds to be posted online for greater transparency. Yet the executive order was silent on employment discrimination by faith-based organizations [19].

Mention must be made also in this section about the Affordable Care Act, one of President Obama’s signature policies of his presidency. The rise of a group known as the Tea Party represents conservative views in the first Obama Administration. According to a study by the Think Tank The Pew Research Center [20], those who identified with the Tea party were likely to hold conservative views on social issues and vote for conservative Republican candidates in elections. They were also more likely to identify themselves as Conservative Christians than those who do not agree with the Tea Party. It was therefore, not a surprise that the Tea party opposed the Obama administration on such issues as gun control, immigration, and abortion.

### Conclusion

For the social worker, the important thing is not that there exists an influence of religion over social welfare policy, but how such influence affects the understanding of a particular policy and the implication for social welfare policy analysis. As Reamer [20] reminded us, the profession of social work rests on a philosophical foundation about the dignity of human life and practitioners of the profession, if they must be agents of change, are called upon to examine critically assumptions and values on which social welfare policies are based. The state plays a significant role in social welfare and in a world of scarce resources, who gets what, when and how and what assumptions are made in the distribution of these resources are important in understanding oppression and injustice. Additionally, the social worker cannot be an agent of change and justice in a broken world without understanding the historical assumptions and ideologies through which policies of the past were based. The philosophical and religious origins and assumptions that informed past social welfare policies cannot be examined if the modern practitioner lacks the knowledge and framework that allow for such examination. In the end, it should be noted that American social welfare policies are based on competing ideologies and one cannot be a good advocate, understand a particular policy, speak to or against it without an understanding of origins, assumptions and values on which those policies are based [21]. In doing effective practice and advocacy, knowledge of what was done in the past can aid in knowing what to do in the present. It can further serve to provide quality filters to help those in the religious minority who are often targets of extreme and oppressive policies.

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